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Introduction

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In the Footsteps of Vincent de Paul

A GUIDE TO VINCENTIAN FRANCE

THIS WORK IS INTENDED TO GUIDE VISITORS on pilgrimage to the France of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac and the members of their religious families. It arose out of an increasing interest shown by Vincentians, Daughters of Charity and their many coworkers in the places of importance to Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac. Although much has been written about some sites, such as Paris and Versailles, other have simply disappeared from view, such as Notre Dame de la Rose. When traveling around France with groups of clerical and lay Vincentians, it became clear to me that a comprehensive guide to Vincentian France, understood in a broad sense, would be of service to others. Before beginning, however, I had to determine what constitutes a Vincentian site. I developed several criteria. First, I have set out to describe all the places where Vincent de Paul lived, worked and visited, from his birth at Pouy near Dax to his death in Paris. Second, I included the religious houses that he founded, even though he may never have visited them. Third, I have included other places that he visited in passing, and about which we know something specific about his presence there. Lastly, I have tried to include those places in which he took an interest, such as Moulins and Bourbon, although he did not found any works there.

Louise de Marillac, a saint in her own right, deserves the same coverage. Consequently, I have included the places where she lived, visited and worked, and the houses and works of the Daughters of Charity that she founded, whether she visited these or not. Since Louise traveled widely, perhaps more than Vincent did at certain periods, I have sought to retrace her steps, at least where there are incidents that were important in her life or in the subsequent life of the Sisters.

I have added some brief historical, cultural and artistic references to help to appreciate these places better, particularly where the Daughters of Charity or the Vincentians, the members of the Congregation of the Mission, carried on their ministries after the death of the two founders. However, I have not described all the houses of the two communities founded in France until the Revolution (such as Auxerre and Bourges), but only those connected with previous history leading back in some way to Vincent and Louise.

I have also given attention to the lives and deaths of the Vincentians or Daughters of Charity martyred during the French Revolution, as well as to Catherine Labouré, Frédéric Ozanam and other significant members of the Double Family of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the nineteenth century. Further, I have included references where possible to the founders of other congregations or works associated in some way with the two founders, such as Francis de Sales and Jane Frances de Chantal and other friends and acquaintances in the seventeenth century, and Jeanne Antide Thouret in the nineteenth.

The many works outside the borders of modern France have not been included here, namely the missions founded by members of both communities in Europe and elsewhere. Also, I have included only those works of the Daughters of Charity and the Vincentians in France in the twentieth century that continue previous commitments, such as Arras and Marseilles. Lastly, some other less known places are mentioned in passing, particularly since they lie close, geographically, to more important sites, and could be visited on the same trip with only a small effort.

Vincent originally intended that his band of mission preachers go only to the countryside to evangelize the religiously abandoned there. However, even though he forbade his confreres to give missions in larger cities, they generally lived in the cities. The reason was that, as they became involved in seminary teaching, they had to live where the seminaries were, normally in the cities. This dichotomy between country and city has been an abiding feature of Vincentian life. A glance at the cities where Vincentian houses were founded in the lifetime of Vincent de Paul, such as in Troyes, Annecy, Marseilles, Cahors, Sedan, Le Mans, Périgueux and Montauban, to name only some, will prove the point. Only a few houses (La Rose, Richelieu, Crécy, Montmirail, Saint-Méen), were in smaller towns. The Daughters of Charity, by contrast, had no such restrictions, and lists of their earliest foundations show that they were spread widely in both towns and cities in France, almost exclusively in the northern half of the country. Nevertheless, many Sisters lived in small temporary communities of two or three in country towns and ministered to the poor there, or at least left town to minister to the sick poor in the country.

I have spent many weeks in the last nine years visiting each of the major sites mentioned here. These visits have been preceded or followed by a review of archival and printed materials describing them. Further, local people have helped in the search for obscure sites, once important for the Sisters or for the Priests and Brothers

of the Mission. Their charity and welcome of a foreigner has made the task much easier and rewarding. My travels were much easier than those of the sisters, priests and brothers of past centuries. They often traveled with friends or had someone to accompany them in private vehicles. If not, they took public transport by land or water. If they survived the dangerous roads or waterways (by sea, rivers or canals), they might lodge with friends or in religious houses. If not, they found that public inns offered only minimal services. In some cities, permission was needed before they could seek lodging, and once installed, guests often found their rooms noisy and crowded. The situation was the same for both men and women travelers unlucky enough to have to look for public accommodations. Both Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul took such occasions to evangelize those they met and urged this practice on others. But Vincent also remarked occasionally that the innkeeper's drunken friends partying below disturbed his sleep. For someone as sensitive to noise as Vincent was, this must have been particularly painful.

Vincent and Louise often wrote about travel by public coach lines linking major cities. They had a further interest in that their missions were supported in some measure by income from these same coaches. An attentive reading of their correspondence will uncover many remarks about travel, such as fatigue, motion sickness, delays and accidents.

It is hoped that those who use this guide will come to appreciate more the breadth of vision of the two founders seen against their geographical and historical background. A traveler could read the book at home or bring it along to serve as a reference while traveling almost anywhere in France, since the country is so full of Vincentian reminiscences.

* * * * *

To facilitate an appreciation of the rich fabric of Vincentian France, I offer the following somewhat technical observations. First, the sources for the lives of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac are principally their own letters. The two main collections are those of *Saint Vincent de Paul. Correspondance, entretiens, documents*, ed. Pierre Coste (Paris, 1920-1925), 14 vols.; *Sainte Louise de Marillac, Écrits Spirituels*, ed. Élisabeth Charpy, (Paris, 1983), and *La Compagnie des Filles de la Charité aux origines. Documents.*, ed. Élisabeth Charpy (Paris, 1989). These excellent sources, both available in English and other languages, in turn made use of the original biographies of the two saints, Louis Abelly, *Vie du vénérable serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul*, (Paris, 1664) and Nicolas Gobillon, *La vie de Mademoiselle Le Gras* (Paris, 1675). Many subsequent biographers, especially in the case of Vincent de Paul, have enlarged and filled out the pictures, and they are rich in geographical details. Such references as there are to any of these works are given here to their English editions. Where an English version does not yet exist, the reference is to the French version.

For Pierre Coste, these are to the volume followed by the page number and include the number of the letter in the English edition.

There are also problems in locating various works. The earliest of Vincent's charitable works, one animated as well by Louise, was the Confraternities of Charity. It has not proven possible to uncover all the sites where a confraternity existed in their lifetimes. Nevertheless, I have mentioned some of the more significant ones, particularly the earliest.

Frustrating research into the history of the early Daughters of Charity is the lack of an accurate and comprehensive list of their establishments. The best one was drawn up in the mid-nineteenth century by Gabriel Perboyre, C.M., a cousin of the martyr. He sought to list all of their foundations until 1792. Gobillon, the first biographer of Louise de Marillac, provided no list. Pierre Collet's revision of Gobillon (Paris, 1769) did include a list of the houses open in his time, but he admitted that it was difficult to be sure about the dates when certain houses began in Paris. Indeed, many houses of the Daughters were temporary since their service was sometimes destined for those in greatest short-term need, such as war refugees, wounded soldiers, or the victims of famine and plague. From another perspective, since the Daughters of Charity were so numerous in France, less so before the Revolution, it might be easier to list where they were not than where they were. Together with their Vincentian brothers and other congregations, they were suppressed in France by the Revolution (18 August 1792), and were dispersed a second time at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lastly, despite the printed and manuscript sources, it has not been possible to determine exactly the length of service of the Daughters at many missions. Those of the Vincentian are, by contrast, better documented.

Besides formal houses, each with a specific contract that Vincent de Paul or his representative, and a local bishop signed, the Congregation of the Mission had many other properties that it was responsible for in a variety of ways. For example, Vincent de Paul inherited numerous farms when he took possession of the priory of Saint Lazare, and he later purchased and managed many others. The Congregation of the Mission continued this practice of purchase or trading properties. The Vincentians also received some country properties as gifts or legacies. Because of the fluid nature of these property holdings, only the most prominent ones have been included here, such as Orsigny and Frenneville. Locations not mentioned here were, for example, Courcelles, a small place, now part of Levallois-Perret, near Clichy; Marly, where Saint Lazare had property; and Le Bourget, where Saint Lazare had property dating back to the twelfth century. The income from these properties went to support the work of the Mission. Since the houses where the Daughters of Charity worked did not generally belong to them, the Sisters were not as involved in the management of extensive properties—a situation that must be understood from the context of France of the Ancien Régime.

Despite the mention of properties (including farms, priories, chapels, bridges,

mills and the like, all income producing), it may appear from reading the text that this guide concentrates excessively on church buildings. This observation is justified since these churches or their successor buildings still exist, whereas many others, such as seminaries, hospitals and convents, do not. The ravages of wars and revolutions, in particular, are to blame for much of this.

One issue that is relatively unknown outside of France is what has sometimes been styled the "second act" of the Revolution. This was the mass expulsion of congregations of men and women religious (including Vincentians and Daughters of Charity) from France around the year 1900. Anticlerical governments succeeded in freeing schools (including seminaries), hospitals and other institutions from any control by religious congregations. The result was that, in the case of the Vincentians, they were expelled from their eight French provinces, and forty-one of their houses in France closed. The Daughters suffered a similar diminishment, but both congregations found ways to continue their works in other countries. Only after the first World War was the situation redressed somewhat.

For the purpose of consistency, the metric system has been used here, although it is occasionally impossible to give accurate calculations of the meaning of the *arpent*, a measure of area. This is even truer for modern values of money from past ages.

Also for the purpose of consistency, and to give a certain French flavor to the text, place names and personal names are generally given in their French form, unless an English form is better known (Francis, instead of François, de Sales, for example).

Where significant individuals appear in the text, I have endeavored to give inclusive dates of birth and death the first time they appear. Otherwise, they can be identified from the Index.

To facilitate travel and visits to the various sites, each one has been identified first by its region (which I have further assembled into four different chapters), and then by the name of its *département* (similar to a county or other small jurisdiction). For locations outside of Paris, street names and addresses have been occasionally given to help locate a site. Following a well-known system, I have given values to several sites. Those with three stars (***) are of exceptional importance, not to be missed. Two stars (**) designate important sites, for those with more time for visits. One star (*) sites are worth a detour in a given area.

I wish to acknowledge the quiet and unstinting help and advice given me by Father Paul Henzmann, C.M., archivist of the Maison-Mère. He has helped me in countless ways to avoid the pitfalls that confront a foreigner in France, and to uncover the abundant resources of our Vincentian history. The late Raymond Chalumeau, C.M., was an inspiration because of his brief guide to Vincentian Paris. Thomas Davitt, C.M., a tireless traveler and able researcher, was probably the first Vincentian to retrace many of the journeys to forgotten Vincentian sites. Thanks are also due to many readers and reviewers, particularly Ignatius Melito, C.M., and to my translators,

whose practiced eyes caught errors that would have otherwise passed unnoticed. The Vincentians of the ongoing formation program at C.I.F. (International Formation Center) received various early versions of this work. I hope they will overlook the many errors and omissions of earlier efforts and recognize their own contributions here.

Besides archival and library resources, I have also been greatly helped by the Blue Guide to religious sites (*Guide Religieux de la France "Bibliothèque des Guides Bleus."* Paris: Hachette, 1967).

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